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SPOTLIGHT: BOOKS

NONFICTION

Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq
By Thomas E. Ricks
The Penguin Press
463 pages, $27.95

'Fiasco' isn't just another left-wing rant

BY EDWARD CUDDIHY
NEWS BOOK REVIEWER

The very title of this latest book on Iraq, whether by design or by chance, reveals author Thomas E. Ricks' political take on the Bush administration's international policy in this important Congressional election year.

But the portrait he paints of the latest U.S. intrusion into Middle East affairs is much more dire than the word "fiasco" would indicate.

It is as if the detonation pin has been pulled on the ultimate weapon but because of all the blundering that has preceded this final act of folly, it is too late to alter the outcome. Rescuing the mission is not in the cards. So we must just stand by and watch the devastating results of our ill-conceived actions.

If you agree with that premise, whether it be for political reasons, social reasons, moral reasons or just because you are an extremely negative thinker, you will love this book.

It is constructed like a master prosecutor's case, eliciting the opinions of diplomatic experts, retired generals, think tankers, and a smattering of GIs on the ground. Ricks allows an occasional nod to the notion that there might be another case to be made, but that case is preposterous and foundering in folly.

Now, if you've already made up your mind that this devastating and controversial best seller is just another left-wing media attack on the flag, the troops and the Pledge of Allegiance, hold on. You might want to read it because prosecutor Ricks makes a strong, well-documented case, a case that likely will be used by its proponents in the political and social struggles of the coming year.

Ricks, as the senior Pentagon correspondent for the Washington Post, starts from a position of knowledge. His work is systematic, thorough and detailed. Maybe he's right that the Iraq invasion was ill-conceived and doomed at its most fundamental level. Or as he puts it: "The U.S. position — suffers from the strategic problems of the fruit of the poisoned tree."

Maybe he is right in judging Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld stubbornly incompetent even in the face of certainty and one of the main culprits in the internecine struggle between the Pentagon, the State Department, the intelligence community and the White House that anticipated and may even have sparked an eventual insurgency. And maybe he has the soft-spoken Ivy League political scientist Paul Wolfowitz pegged when he describes his almost religious fervor in his long-running crusade to bring down Saddam Hussein at all cost.

Maybe Ricks is right when he describes Gen. Tommy R. Frank's apparent initial victories as no more than a hasty plunge which bypassed the enemy, allowing it to fight another kind of war on another day. And maybe he's right in describing the hard-working Senior U.S. Commander Ricardo Sanchez as the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time. And it's probably not an overstatement that a large number of American troops on the ground distinguished themselves very poorly in their treatment of the Iraqi citizenry.

Ricks certainly is in the position to dig out this kind of information. But even so, there must be an expert or two out there somewhere who thinks that something has gone right for some of the right reasons, somewhere in Iraq.

Associated Press
Thomas Ricks' "Fiasco" is a legal brief, a well-documented treatise about combat in Iraq.

Ricks' publisher makes a strong case for the author's journalistic credentials and his knowledge and experience of the inner workings of our government. Yet this old editor would question some of his journalistic techniques. History may prove his conclusions 100 percent accurate — I hope not because in his portrait, there is no possible way out of the morass — but don't look for objective reporting here. This is thinly veiled advocacy journalism at its best — possibly just what is needed — but if there is even some slight positive to be gained from this country's move against Saddam, Ricks didn't report it.

This is not a human look at the Iraq War or at the countless lives it has touched and careers it has tarnished. It is a legal brief, a well-documented treatise. You don't get to know any of the 400 or so persons the author quotes, although no doubt the reader already known many of them from their government positions or their appearances on the Sunday morning talking heads shows.

Ricks makes a strong case that during the run up to the invasion, it was common knowledge in high places in government that the reasons for going to war were faulty and the strategy for winning over the Iraqis was overly optimistic, if it existed at all. If that is true, it is difficult to understand why he doesn't attack with his full zeal the Fourth Estate for its cheerleading and apparent incompetence during the run up.

Oh yes, he does cite his journalistic colleagues, notably Judith Miller of the New York Times, for their failures at this stage, but it is a soft and painless sort of citation.

And in fairness, Ricks does devote a 16-page chapter that follows 400 pages of devastating criticism to some good things that did happen in 2005 in Iraq. Incidentally, the name of that chapter is "Too Little, Too Late?". And it may be too little too late in more than one sense. Just when you think "Fiasco" is a lengthy and convincing argument for the immediate pullout of American troops from Iraq, Ricks dispels that notion in the final chapter where he makes the case that such an action would be disastrous, the consequences of which would be felt by our grandchildren's children.

So there we have it: It was a mistake to go in the first place, it was handled with near-total incompetence, and there is no good end to come of it, but we dare not leave. That would appear to be the thesis. Now the jury of history is out on the case.

Ed Cuddihy handled his share of advocacy journalism as well as objective reporting during several decades as an editor at The Buffalo News.

NONFICTION

No mincing words in assessing WNY's political, business leadership

BY MARK SOMMER
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Imagine the captain of the Titanic worrying about what score the ship's musicians should play as lifeboats were being cast overboard.

That's similar to how author Dana Dillaway portrays the failure of Buffalo's power elite to confront the city's latter 20th-century decline in her book, "Power Failure: Politics, Patronage, and the Economic Future of Buffalo, New York."

Dillaway contends that rather than weather or geography, it was the city's selfish business and political leadership that held Buffalo back by refusing to adjust to changing economic and cultural conditions. Several key decisions by decision makers beginning in the 1950s are given particular scrutiny for their impact on downtown, notably deciding not to locate the State University at Buffalo or the Buffalo Bills there, or to link Buffalo and Amherst by rail.

The white Anglo Saxon Protestant leadership's reluctance to reach out to the black community during the 1960s period of upheaval is also examined, including the eventual development of the successful East Side organization BUILD. The racially-divisive reign of Mayor Jimmy Griffin, Dillaway writes, would help ruin such community-based movements.

Together, these decisions — which continue to haunt Buffalo today — are used as case studies in how Buffalo lagged behind progressive urban planning and development found elsewhere.

Examining the subject was a natural for Dillaway, who worked in urban and community development in California, where she lives, and grew up in Buffalo and Derby as a member of the Wendt family. She saw Buffalo's decline firsthand, including the dramatic loss of steel and other industries and the replacement of locally-owned industries by multinational corporations generally less committed to the city and region.

An ardent supporter of regionalism, Dillaway maintains business elites and city administrations were unable or unwilling to unite around a vision or plan for the future out of a fear of change. She suggests that contrary to popular view, Gov. Nelson Rockefeller was open to locating UB downtown but Buffalo's business class didn't want "those radicals and blacks running around downtown."

Power Failure: *Politics, Patronage, and the Economic Future of Buffalo, New York*
By Diana Dillaway
Prometheus
238 pages, $24.

"A downtown university, for example, meant thousands of students would bring their progressive politics and ideas into the heart of the city. It would also bring into the city a more progressive political constituency and electorate. Better, some mused, that these potentially powerful forces remain on Buffalo's doorstep, the suburbs," Dillaway said.

Similar thinking, she says, killed the rail linkage to Amherst and the stadium's relocation to downtown.

Dillaway says the book was intended for academics, and in that she knows little doubt. The writing is dry and colorless, lacking the blood and guts you would expect to find in a story about the tumultuous decline of New York State's second biggest city. The fault begins with Dillaway's journalistically shaky methodology. She promised anonymity to all those interviewed, leaving behind, as she freely acknowledges, enormous problems of reliability and accountability. This unusual degree of unnamed sources makes it hard to know at times how much stock to put in what's written.

"Power Failure," then, makes for a peculiar historical account that is largely devoid of the names of key civic figures who determined the city's fate.

Despite these significant flaws, it does provide a valuable framework for understanding the financial and political forces that guided Buffalo for years and may still be pulling strings from behind the curtain.

Mark Sommer is a News staff writer.

Editor's Choice

The Discomfort Zone: A Personal History *By Jonathan Franzen (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 195 pages, $22);* ***The Afterlife: A Memoir*** *By Donald Antrim (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 194 pages, $20).* Franzen, remember, eventually wound up to be the clear winner of the Battle of Oprah's Book Club. When his National Book Award-winning novel "The Corrections" was chosen by America's omnipotent Daytime Maharini and Franzen balked, rather than weep on camera, lump on her couch and submit to TV falsification, the most revealing cultural battle of our time ensued. On Oprah's side were the faithful, profit-hungry publishers and literary elitists ravenous for mainstream attention long denied them. On the other were literary realists and enlightened mid-level TV people who truly understood exactly what hoops Oprah's minions expected authors to jump through — and how reluctant a self-respecting writer might be to abandon all hope of literary truth. The falling dominoes eventually caused her to close up that edition of her book club and reopen a more classic-oriented, less power-mongering version. Franzen wrote about the experience in his superb essay collection "How to Be Alone." And Oprah, to her eternal credit, not only got the message but acted on it.

Jonathan Franzen: Family recollections in "The Discomfort Zone."

Franzen can indeed be a remarkable writer, as Donald Antrim, his fellow member of a mutual admiration society, knows. Franzen and Antrim not only share a publisher and a tendency to leg-end (reviewing one another, appearing together at public readings) but they have published, within months of each other, two memoirs of mothers dying and growing up dysfunctionally in the heartland.

The title of Franzen's "The Discomfort Zone," the distinctly lesser but more easily approached one, is a takeoff on Franzen's unyielding father's insistence on keeping their house's thermostat to what it identified as "the comfort zone." The book begins with his trip back to St. Louis to sell the family's house after his mother's death. It ends, uncomfortably later, after much wit, graceful writing and even more inconsequence. This, all-too-often, is the Nerd Division of the Great American Childhood (religious young people's church group, bird-watching), as if Booth Tarkington's studious brother were pretending to be Eugene O'Neill. The result seems like extremely artful whining.

Donald Antrim: Life with an alcoholic mother.

Altogether more substantial — haunting even — is Antrim's memoir of growing up with his creative, alcoholic, enraged, hopelessly disturbed mother Louane with the help of his grandfather, a former high school principal given to "painstaking and methodical, stooped-over Presbyterian labors" (including the care of his wretchedly unhappy daughter.) This is an elegy far indeed from Booth Tarkington and manufactured fretfulness. It is real and absolutely searing about the hard-won victories of discovery, not the minor derailments of discomfort.

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Chuck Klosterman IV: A Decade of Curious People and Dangerous Ideas *(SCRIBNER, 379 pages, $25).* There are no more Lester Bangs or Richard Meltzers crazily patrolling pop music and its environs anymore. At the moment, though, no omnivorous critic of American pop culture is more fun than Chuck Klosterman — not even Cintra Wilson. The new collection by the author of "Sex, Lies and Cocoa Puffs" and "Killing Yourself to Live" begins with this declaration: "Britney Spears is th most famous person I've ever interviewed. She was also the weirdest. I assume this is not a coincidence." And goes on from there.

Subjects here range from Radiohead and Val Kilmer to Johnny Carson, Monogamy and Chicken McNuggets (he anticipated Morgan Spurlock's film "Supersize Me" by eight years). Warning: freelancer Klosterman writes for money which means he writes by the ton, not the pound. He is, at his best, wild, woolly and delightful.

— Jeff Simon

Literary notes

Actor **Bruce Campbell** will read, discuss and sign copies of his new book, "Make Love the Bruce Campbell Way," at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday in Borders Books and Music, 3135 Walden Ave., Cheektowaga.

"Stories to Harvest" is the theme for this month's storytelling program with the **Spin-a-Story Tellers** at 7:30 p.m. Friday in their new location at Holy Spirit Church/School, 85 De Iroita Ave.

Best Sellers

Hardcover

FICTION

Nora Roberts: Murderous tale.

1. **Judge & Jury** by James Patterson and Andrew Gross (Little, Brown, $27.99). Legal thriller pits two people against vicious and powerful enemy.
2. **The Messenger** by Daniel Silva (Putnam, $25.95). A terrorist bombing in St. Peter's Square leaves hundreds dead, the Pope injured, and the Basilica a ghastly, smoking pile.
3. **Angels Fall** by Nora Roberts (Putnam, $25.95). Wounded chef from Boston is doubted when she witnesses a murder in the Texas.
4. **The Ruins** by Scott Smith (Knopf, $24.95). Horror-thriller about four Americans who stumble across a nightmare in the Mexican jungle.
5. **Phantom** by Terry Goodkind (Tor, $29.95). Part 2 in the Chainfire Trilogy and Book 10 in the Sword of Truth fantasy series about a war-torn world.
6. **Can't Wait to Get to Heaven** by Fannie Flagg (Random House, $25.95). Unlikely experiences of a high-spirited octogenarian inspire a town to ponder: Why are we here?
7. **Happiness Sold Separately** by Lolly Winston (Warner, $21.95). Infertility and infidelity pack a potent and potentially fatal one-two punch to one's idyllic marriage is exploration of marital commitment and liberation.
8. **Twelve Sharp** by Janet Evanovich (R. Martin's, $26.95). Slapstick and gunplay surround sassy, less than competent New Jersey bounty hunter Stephanie Plum.
9. **Crisis** by Robin Cook (Putnam, $25.95). Medical thriller focuses on "concierge" medicine that caters to the affluent willing to pay for special attention.
10. **Pegasus Descending** by James Lee Burke (Simon & Schuster, $26). New Iberia, La., detective Dave Robicheaux revisits his past in the 18th book in the series.

— *Publishers Weekly*

NONFICTION

Cesar Milan: Poochly advice.

1. **Marley & Me** by John Grogan (Morrow, $21.95). A tribute to a Labrador Retriever who doesn't fit the usual mold.
2. **Fiasco** by Thomas E. Ricks (Penguin Press, $27.95). Washington Post's Pentagon correspondent covers the war in Iraq from planning to the continued insurgency in early 2006.
3. **The World Is Flat** by Thomas Friedman (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $30). Updated and expanded version has more to say about "uploading," the direct-from-the-bottom creation of culture, knowledge and innovation.
4. **Cesar's Way** by Cesar Millan with Melissa Jo Peltier (Harmony, $24.95). Accessible guide to help new and current dog owners better understand the needs of their pets.
5. **I Feel Bad About My Neck** by Nora Ephron (Knopf, $19.95). A candid look at women who are getting older and dealing with the tribulations of life.
6. **Freakonomics** by Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner (Morrow, $25.95). Economist focuses his attention on real-world issues.
7. **The Looming Tower** by Lawrence Wright (Knopf, $17.95). New Yorker writer brings exhaustive research and delightful prose to the history of terrorism.
8. **Dispatches From the Edge** by Anderson Cooper (HarperCollins, $24.95). CNN reporter weaves personal tragedies into the graver stories of suffering he's observing.
9. **MacBrewer** by Nathaniel Philbrick (Viking, $29.95). National Book Award-winner examines the history of the Plymouth Colony.
10. **Guinness World Records 2007** (Guinness Publishing, $28.95). This edition adds photographs to more than 1,000 new and updated records. Gatefold page features kids' favorite categories.

— *Publishers Weekly*

FINAL

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